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Our Small World: Hebrew Children's Letters and Modern Upbringing in Czarist Russia

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Abstract The historiography of modern Hebrew culture views early twentieth-century Russia largely through the lens of canonical literature. However, Hebrew played a role in many other aspects of Jewish society, prominent among them children's literature. By examining readers' letters published in four Hebrew children's magazines, this article explores the spread and meaning of the language for different sectors of Russian Jewry. It claims that Hebrew played a role in Jewish modernization for those who did not identify with Zionism and even those who claimed to reject modernism entirely. To better understand East European Jewish life through the prism of multifaceted Hebrew culture, this article studies publications of varied ideological positions—Zionist, nonpartisan nationalist, and Orthodox—to provide a more comprehensive picture of Jewish perception of Hebrew. It shows how, despite their disparities, the four publications employed similar strategies when addressing young readers, directing them to a desired worldview and mobilizing them to social activity. The readers' letters in these magazines reveal the experience of learning, reading, and speaking the renewed language in the context of family life, social pressure, and gender dynamics. They provide essential information about methods, habits, and patterns of using Hebrew inside and outside the classroom. In addition, the letters shed light on the interaction between children and adults—parents, teachers, and newspaper editors—against the backdrop of the vibrant ideological discourse of the era. On balance, the current research offers a contribution to the study of revitalized Hebrew culture as well as the social history of modern European Jewry.

Keywords Hebrew language · Jewish education · Jewish press · Childhood studies

Introduction

The early twentieth century was a critical period in the development of modern Hebrew. Famously, it was the era of literary giants such as Bialik, Tchernichovsky, Brenner, and other canonical authors who shaped the style of the renewed language.[1] It was also the era of a vibrant, albeit unstable, Hebrew press, with continuously expanding circles of readers and writers. Modern methods of Hebrew instruction infiltrated the traditional education system,

[1] Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle, 1988); Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford, 2011).

fostering a new generation of Hebrew literates. This audience of students, teachers, lay readers, and amateur journalists were the indispensable backbone of the Hebrew renaissance. This was especially true with respect to children and teenagers, who represented the sole reliable audience in the economically risky field of Hebrew publishing.[2] Later, these young readers were also critical to the revival of spoken Hebrew, albeit mainly in Palestine/Israel.[3] Yet despite their significance for the expansion of modern Hebrew, we still know little about the children who were being taught Hebrew.

At the turn of the twentieth century, most Jews in Czarist Russia spoke Yiddish, and despite the acclaimed value of Hebrew as the historical and national language, its advocates struggled to spread its knowledge and culture. Yiddish culture was on the rise and political Yiddishism gained influence, especially after the legal reform that followed the 1905 revolution, which gave rise to Jewish public space that was previously restricted.[4] This situation led to the decrease of Hebrew literature and to despair among Hebraists. Directing their effort toward education of youth was an attempt to foster an interest in Hebrew among a new generation.[5] To understand how the knowledge of Hebrew spread and penetrated mundane, secular domains, we must take account of the children's perspective.

Children comprise an important subject of historical research owing to their position at the intersection of several social dimensions: the family, the community, the culture, and the government. The way in which they are raised, the ideas instilled in them, and the changes in norms of education, duties, and rights—all these reflect the values and conditions of the given society in which the children live. In the words of historian Steven Mintz, "Childhood . . . is the true missing link: connecting the personal and the public, the psychological and the sociological, the domestic and the state."[6]

Historical research in recent decades has reflected a growing interest in all types of Jewish education in Czarist Russia—private schools, public schools,

[2] Dan Miron, *When Loners Come Together: A Portrait of Hebrew Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1987), 39–43.

[3] Yael Reshef, "On the Role of Children in the Revival of Hebrew," in *No Small Matter: Features of Jewish Childhood*, ed. Anat Helman (Oxford, 2021), 20–38.

[4] Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington, 2004), 23–54; Vladimir Levin, *From Revolution to War: Jewish Politics in Russia 1907–1914* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2016); Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Stanford, 2012), 141–71.

[5] Meirav Reuveny, "Between Symbolism and Practice: Hebrew in the National Jewish Discourse, 1875–1914," *AJS Review* (forthcoming).

[6] Steven Mintz, "Why the History of Childhood Matters," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5 (2012): 15–28, at 17.

gymnasia and, of course, the *ḥeder*.[7] Scholars have explored the educational vision and practices of teachers, students, and various institutions. They have analyzed the division between Haskalah, nationalism, and Russification in terms of the available educational options, which presented a diversity of approaches towards raising the younger generation. Nonetheless, our understanding of the experience of the students themselves is lacking, especially with respect to Hebrew instruction. The autobiographical literature presents a narrative that often jumps from the author's unpleasant memories of a traditional *ḥeder* to the wonders of modern Hebrew literature.[8] This memoir genre generally omits any description of the daily experience of learning a still-emerging language or of the students' encounters with its new literature and institutions. Recreational activities and peer interaction, which form a critical cultural element in the immediate sense, are also usually neglected in these autobiographical works. This relative silence belies the fact that the Hebrew education and literature network was actually quite broad, comprised of countless teachers, students, textbooks, pedagogical materials, and original literature.

This reality gives rise to several questions: How did the children perceive their Hebrew studies, both inside and outside the classroom? What were the gender dynamics, and how did the children themselves perceive them? In which ways did use of Hebrew influence introduction of different ideological worldviews? And what was the relation between the spread of Hebrew and the growing modernization of Russian Jewry?

This article offers an in-depth look at the Hebrew child in his or her own words. Through readers' letters published in four Hebrew magazines for children, it examines the ways in which boys and girls studied, read, and wrote Hebrew, communicated with each other using this shared linguistic framework and engaged in discussions of public issues. It also explores the range of ideological perceptions reflected in the editorial line and the choice of materials of each publication. Freeing Hebrew from the confinement of a specific political movement and from the stories of the renowned authors sheds a surprising light on the language's importance for daily life throughout Jewish society.

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[7]David Assaf and Immanuel Etkes, eds., *The Heder: Studies, Documents, Literature and Memoirs* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2010); Eliyana R. Adler, *In Her Hands: The Education of Jewish Girls in Tsarist Russia* (Detroit, 2011); Brian Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late-Tsarist Russia* (Seattle, 2009); Alex Valdman, "A Miracle in Minsk: Secondary Education and Social Mobility in the Pale of Settlement before 1887," *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 135–56; Mordechai Zalkin, *Modernizing Jewish Education in Nineteenth Century Eastern Europe*: *The School as the Shrine of the Jewish Enlightenment* (Boston, 2016).

[8]Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Waltham, MA, 2004).

The readers' letters are a fascinating source for several reasons. First, they present the perspective of the Hebrew-learning child, as well as his or her surroundings. Second, the names, ages, locations, and gender of the letter writers provide valuable data for gauging the spread of Hebrew education across different Jewish communities in Russia and beyond. Third, the political spectrum represented in these publications is wider than might be expected: of the four magazines discussed here, only one identified as Zionist; two others leaned toward nonpartisan Hebrew nationalism; and the fourth was exclusively Orthodox. This diversity presents a more comprehensive picture of Hebrew's changing role for the various sectors of Jewish society at the relevant period.

Historically, letter writing manuals (*igron*) for Hebrew instruction and as templates for personal use for both children and adults were widely in use. Despite decline of the genre in the twentieth century, letter writing remained a meaningful part of education, and the practice reflected the changing social values within the Jewish community.[9] As we will see, children who studied Hebrew in modernized institutions continued to pen letters in the classroom, but now these letters were addressed to newspapers—a form of letter writing that was not covered in the traditional manuals. Many children, however, wrote letters outside the framework of school, presumably on their own initiative.

The originality of the style and content of these letters is somewhat suspect.[10] It is likely that adults—parents, teachers, and editors—encouraged children to write about specific subjects and sometimes rewrote their texts. Publishers also chose to print well-written letters that were consistent with their own worldviews, thus motivating other readers to follow a known model. However, since the letters usually described small-scale, mundane affairs, there is little reason to question their authenticity; even if they exaggerated, the young authors frequently added specific details attesting to the genuineness of their letters. Their writing style was diverse, ranging from archaic rabbinic language to renewed Hebrew, and displayed varied ideas of what was considered good writing. I was unable to discern any concrete evidence of editors rewriting children's letters as a general policy or in specific texts.

In fact, a consideration of the inherent biases behind these letters is itself valuable. Since the issue in question is the sociological context of children's

[9]Tal Kogman, "'Do Not Turn a Deaf Ear or a Blind Eye on Me, as I Am Your Son': New Conceptions of Childhood and Parenthood in 18th- and 19th-Century Jewish Letter-Writing Manuals," *Journal of Jewish Education* 82 (2016): 4–27.

[10]For another study using children's letters to the editor as a source, see Sherry Olson and Peter Holland, "Conversation in Print among Children and Adolescents in the South Island of New Zealand, 1886–1909," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 12 (2019): 219–40.

Hebrew culture, it is instructive to take note of the influence of the anonymous adult behind the child who wrote each particular letter. Furthermore, the childish sentiment channeled through the letters, even if revised to an extent by an adult, is no less important to the research than the hard facts. In his monograph on young adults' autobiographies in interwar Poland, Ido Bassok has noted that the young age of the authors adds a layer of interest to their personal writing, as compared to old-age memoir writing, which generally reflects a tendency to retrospectively smooth over past conflicts. The contradictions and hyperbole to be found in these texts are an expression of the turmoil prevailing during the relevant period, itself an intriguing subject for the historian.[11]

Readers' letters in the children's magazines could also be seen as part of the tradition of local correspondents in the Hebrew press. These self-appointed journalists reported on (often trivial) news from their towns, and the style, authenticity, and value of their texts were always questionable. Nonetheless, the short articles are a valuable source for the study of Jewish life in the provinces—both for the contemporary public as well as for modern historians.[12] The children's letters are thus partly a continuation of this journalistic genre and provide testimony regarding a larger cultural context.

In sum, this article does not accept the children's letters as mere factual reports, but rather as evidence of how they experienced the Hebrew language and of how the language informed their interaction with their immediate environment and the broader Jewish community.

The Magazines

Children's magazines flourished in the Russian Empire at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, giving expression to varied political beliefs and literary trends.[13] Establishing a sustainable periodical for children in Hebrew, however, was not a simple matter. Government censorship, a limited reading public, and the scarcity of appropriate materials rendered any such publication (whether for adults or children) a money-losing enterprise. Nonetheless, the early twentieth-century newspapers for children were often of high quality and creations with a lasting impact. They took inspiration

[11] Ido Bassok, *The Revival of the Jewish Youth: Family and Education in Poland between the World Wars* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2015), 13–14.

[12] Dror Segev, "The Social Role of the Hebrew Press in the Russian Empire during the Regime of Tsar Alexander III (1881–1894)" [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2015), 141–59.

[13] Ben Hellman, *Fairy Tales and True Stories: The History of Russian Literature for Children and Young People* (*1574–2010*) (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 256–92.

from their Russian counterparts with respect to content, internal sections, and design, even if they often struggled to achieve comparable standards. None of the publications addressed here—the main such publications during this era—have been studied in depth previously.[14] The only children's magazines that have been examined thoroughly, by Adina Bar-El, Yael Darr, and Rima Shikhmanter, are from a later period—interwar Poland and pre-state Israel.[15] It should be noted that aside from short-lived attempts, in the pre-1914 period there was no Hebrew children's magazine published in the *Yishuv*.

The first Hebrew newspaper for children that remained in print for more than a few issues was Abraham Mordechai Piorka's *Gan Sha'ashu'im*, published in Lyck, Prussia (today Elk, Poland) in 1899–1900. It was heavily didactic and did not include readers' letters, and therefore is not discussed here.[16]

A much more substantial magazine in both substance and duration, *Olam Katan* (A Small World) from the Warsaw publisher Tushiyah, followed a year later (fig. 1). *Olam Katan* was published monthly (and later biweekly) between 1901 and 1904. For technical reasons, it was printed in Vienna and Kraków but was distributed mainly in Russia. Tushiyah specialized in popular Hebrew literature and textbooks, and its founder Ben-Avigdor (Abraham Leib Shalkovich, 1866–1921), initiated the publication as part of a mission to produce mass literature in Hebrew. Working with Shmuel Leib Gordon (1865–1933), a prolific pedagogue, Ben-Avigdor offered young readers stories, poems, news, science essays, and biographies, as well as riddles, jokes, and lively illustrations. The periodical featured original works by Shaul Tchernichovsky, Yehuda Gur-Grazovsky, Shalom Asch, and the young Yaakov Fichman, alongside translations of contemporary European literature. Since its editors were devoted Zionists, the newspaper included many articles about the movement's activities and life in the Land of Israel. Hebrew was central

[14] A recent article discusses the background for publishing *Olam Katan* but addresses its content only briefly; see Agnieszka Jagodzińska, "How to Create a Hebrew Reader? Olam Katan (1901–1904) and the Young Hebrew Reading Public," *Children's Literature in Education* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-022-09520-w.

[15] Adina Bar-El, *When I Grow Up, I Will Make Aliya: The Tarbut Network in Poland and Its Children's Periodicals* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2003); Yael Darr, "When the Mobilized Was Beautiful and the Beautiful Was Mobilized" [in Hebrew], *Kesher* 44 (2013): 80–86; Rima Shikhmanter, *Paper Friend: Israeli Children's Journalism in the First Decade of the State* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2014).

[16] For general information on this publication and on those discussed below, as well as some other periodicals, see Uriel Ofek, *Hebrew Children's Literature: 1900–1948* [in Hebrew], 2 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1988), 1:167–215.

Figure 1. Illustrated Title of *Olam Katan*, by G. Tschorny, 1903. Note the lack of Jewish identifiers and the presence of a girl in the foreground.

to *Olam Katan*'s Zionism and to its readers' letters; in most of its 160 issues, two to five such letters were published.[17]

A similar endeavor was Israel Binyamin Levner's (1862–1916) *Ha-Perahim* (The Flowers), published weekly in the relatively remote city of Lugansk (Luhans′k, Ukraine) from 1908 to 1914. Levner was an author, educator, and government-appointed rabbi who handled the paper's administrative and editorial work more or less single-handedly. Nonetheless, and although it suffered from inconsistent design and typical printing difficulties, *Ha-Perahim* included diverse literature (both original and in translation), scientific articles, news, photographs, and illustrations. Among others, contributors included Dvora Baron, Yehuda Steinberg, and Levin Kipnis. In contrast with *Olam Katan*, *Ha-Perahim* did not report recent Zionist news, nor did it offer biographies of known Hebrew authors. Stories about historical Jewish heroes and appreciation of the Hebrew language contributed to a sense of national identity, but Levner never connected these ideas with any specific contemporary political ideology. Readers' letters were published regularly in the approximately 220 issues that I was able to review—excluding the third year of publication, in which the magazine struggled.

Another short-lived yet ambitious publication was *He-Chaver* (The Friend), published by journalist, teacher, and author Israel Haim Tawiow (1858–1920). It appeared daily in Vilnius during the first half of 1908 and on a weekly basis thereafter. By design, news reports comprised a significant part of *He-Chaver*, but it also included serialized stories, feuilletons, and informative articles. Like Levner, Tawiow refrained from Zionist indoctrination. The publication nonetheless reflected pride in the cultural heritage

[17] The number of issues mentioned here follows Ofek (*Hebrew Children's Literature*, 177); the estimation of the letters' numbers is mine. I hope to conduct a quantitative analysis of the letters, their writers, and their hometowns in the near future.

of the Jewish people, especially the Hebrew language. Two or three letters appeared in about half of the 104 the daily issues, and on a more limited basis in the sixty-three issues of the weekly edition.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum stood *Ha-Ach* (The Brother), a project of Chabad rabbi Josef Isaac Schneersohn, edited by his close disciple Moshe Rosenblum (1850–1928).[18] *Ha-Ach* was published weekly between 1910 and 1914 in Lyubavichi, as a fundraising tool for the local yeshiva, *Tomchei Temimim*. It contained Yiddish texts alongside the Hebrew ones and almost no images; other than the biographies of certain rabbis, it included no news or informational articles. Rosenblum penned most of the paper's serialized stories, weekly Torah essays, and editorials—occasionally addressing them to teachers and parents rather than to children. The message nevertheless stayed the same: calling upon readers to avoid the temptations of general education and remain committed to Torah learning and to a pious Jewish life. Letters from young readers were not featured often, but such letters still comprised a part of the 143 issues of this pioneering publication.

The Many Paths of Hebrew Learning

> In our city, thanks to the efforts of the teacher B. Greenfeld, an association called "Boys Who Love the Hebrew Language" . . . was recently founded. Every Saturday, we gather; the teacher Greenfeld, who is a member of the leadership, reads us some book or article, and we discuss and argue about the Hebrew [language]. I hope our parents will finally understand that our love of the Hebrew language is not preventing us from being good students at the gymnasium, and not only will they not put obstacles in our way anymore with different excuses, but they will also support us with their money.
> –Eliyahu, son of Yosef Karasikow, Astrakhan.[19]

Despite their many differences, all four magazines valued one thing above all: learning. And while each defined good learning differently, they encouraged their readers to report on their studies and their progress. The vast majority of letters sent to these publications began by noting the writer's educational level and place of study, often specifying his or her progress in Hebrew language studies. The formats of such schools were varied, displaying the range

[18] About *Ha-Ach* in the context of Chabad activity in Russia, see Ilya Lurie, *The Lubavitch Wars: Chabad Hasidism in Tsarist Russia* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2018), 105–06.

[19] *Ha-Perahim* 2, no. 19 (1909). All translations are mine; I tried to replicate the original style of the young writers as far as possible, including the inconsistent mentions of their hometowns.

of educational possibilities and ideologies in the late Czarist era. That was particularly true for *Olam Katan* and *Ha-Perahim*, the two magazines whose primary goal was to spread the Hebrew language among their readership and beyond.

A significant group of letters came from students of the *ḥadarim metukanim* (reformed schools). These were schools that were known for their nationalist character and their use of the "Hebrew in Hebrew" pedagogical method. Since this method prescribed exclusive use of the language in the classroom and interactive study, the newspapers' texts, images, and games were particularly welcomed. The *ḥeder metukan* children often identified themselves as the students of a certain teacher, who undoubtedly subscribed to the newspaper on behalf of the whole class and encouraged letter writing as good practice. See, for example, the following typical letter, signed by eight boys from Yanovka (Bereslavka, Ukraine):

> For three years, we have studied in a Hebrew school, and we already went through the early and latter Prophets and now we are learning Psalms. We have also read many Hebrew books, and now we are reading the *Olam Katan* and enjoying ourselves very much from its pleasant stories and the style of its language. [This was followed by specification of favorite texts]. And we thank our dear parents, who gave us money to subscribe to the paper, and our teacher, who advised us to subscribe to it. We hope that it will not be long before we can speak well in our Hebrew language.[20]

In this description, the Bible is identified as a fundamental part of the curriculum. Parents are represented as supportive of modern Hebrew, as evidenced both by the school chosen for their sons and by their willingness to pay for the *Olam Katan* subscription. This contrasts with the parents in the first quoted letter, who apparently saw Hebrew, even in an informal framework, as a waste of time for boys who should be devoting their efforts to their gymnasium studies. Given the *numerus clausus* put on Jews in the Russian higher education system and the economic hardships of the Jewish population, it is no wonder that parents valued formal learning above the impractical study of Hebrew.

For others, there was a conflict between the experience in Hebrew school and with members of their peer group. Shaul Kipnis, nephew of Levin Kipnis—later a beloved Hebrew children's author and himself a teenage contributor to the periodicals—wrote that "in the *ḥeder*, our teacher speaks Hebrew with us, and we are happy about it, but when I go outside and hear many

[20] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 31 (1902).

of my friends, students of the Russian school, speaking Russian, I am saddened [*libi alay davay*]." The letter concluded with the wish to join an uncle in Palestine "where only Hebrew is spoken."[21]

Many parents with the means to do so preferred to employ a private tutor to teach Jewish subjects at home, to fill in the gaps left by public school education or to replace a disappointing *ḥeder*. With or without parents' approval, these teachers were often the gateway for a modern attitude toward Hebrew—pedagogically and ideologically. One eight-year-old, for example, wrote that in two years at a traditional *ḥeder*, he acquired little command of the language. This changed when he began studying with a new teacher, who had also recommended *Olam Katan*.[22] The young teachers promoted the study of Hebrew even when it was not their official role: Alter from Yekaterinoslav (Dnipro) wrote that the student-tutor who was preparing him for the Russian school had exposed him to *Olam Katan*.[23]

At times, differentiation between private and collective education is blurred, but the teacher's influence is nonetheless significant. An illuminating example is a letter from five boys relating that after years of studying mainly Talmud with "old teachers . . . , a young teacher from Kyiv county" had arrived in their small town. This passionate pedagogue had introduced new elements into their curriculum. Aside from teaching them Bible with the traditional commentary of Rashi, he also taught them Russian and math and used modern textbooks for studying Hebrew. Of course, he also directed them to subscribe to *Ha-Perahim* (fig. 2).[24] The ordinary Hebrew teacher is revealed here as an essential agent of the spread of Hebrew, even without institutional support, and as playing an important role in expanding the reach of the children's magazines.[25]

Beyond language issues, letters of this kind inform us about the varied notions of modernity that prevailed among the generation that came to age in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, Jewish children faced the struggle to enroll in a Russian school and to follow a path of integration. On the other hand, some parents and educators were engaged in efforts to reform the traditional method of Jewish learning and to nurture national Jewish identity. These options were not mutually exclusive, nor was there necessarily friction between the two efforts. There was no harsh intergenerational

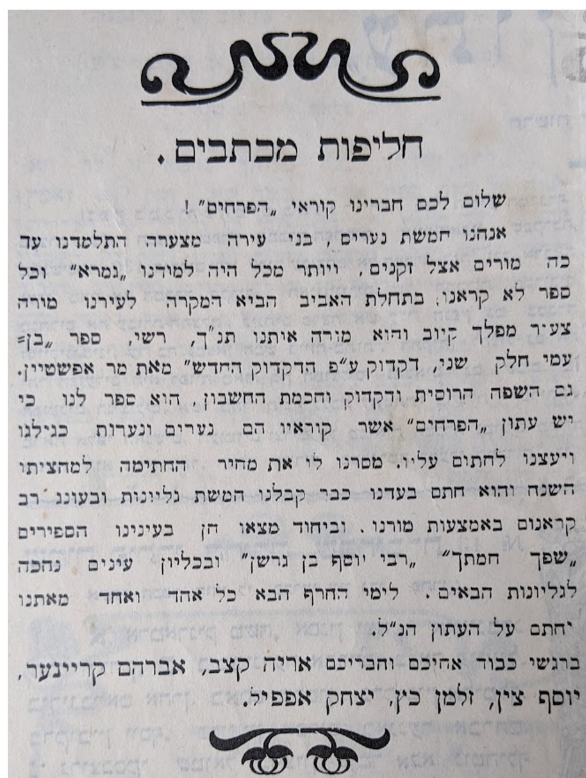
[21] *Ha-Perahim* 6, no.17 (1913). This description of the linguistic situation in Palestine was far from true.

[22] *Olam Katan* 3, no. 17 (1903).

[23] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 40 (1902).

[24] *Ha-Perahim* 3, no. 20–21 (1910).

[25] After World War I, when Jewish education in Eastern Europe became more organized, pupils' subscriptions to a children's magazine became a common practice; see Bar-El, *When I Grow Up*, 40–41.



חליפות מכתבים.

שלום לכם חברינו קוראי „הפרחים" !

אנחנו חמשת נערים, בני עירה מצערה התלמדנו עד
כה מורים אצל זקנים, ויותר מכל היה למודנו „גמרא" וכל
ספר לא קראנו; בתחלת האביב הביא המקרה לעירנו מורה
צעיר מפלך קיוב והוא מורה אתנו תנ"ך, רשי, ספר „בן-
עמי חלק שני, דקדוק ע"פ הדקדוק החדש" מאת מר אפשטיין.
גם השפה הרוסית ודקדוק וחכמת החשבון, הוא ספר לנו כי
יש עתון „הפרחים" אשר קוראיו הם נערים ונערות כגילנו
וייעצנו לחתום עליו. מסרנו לו את מחיר החתימה למחציתו
השנה והוא חתם בעדנו כבר קבלנו הטשת גליונות ובעונג רב
קראנום באמצעות מורנו. וביחוד מצאו חן בעינינו הספירים
„שפך חמתך" „רבי יוסף בן גרשן" ובכליון עינים נחכה
לגליונות הבאים. לימי החרף הבא כל אחד ואחד מאתנו
יחתם על העתון הנ"ל.

ברגשי כבוד אחיכם וחבריכם אריה קצב, אברהם קריינער,
יוסף צין, זלמן כין, יצחק אפפיל.

Figure 2. A Letter from *Ha-Perahim*, 1910.

conflict, as there had been during the Haskalah era, nor was there a sense of condescension towards the traditional way of life that characterized the attitude of the Russified *maskilim* of the 1860s and 1870s. During the late Czarist period, the discourse about Jewish education among activists became less polarized between progressives and conservatives.[26] For example, the attitude toward the *ḥeder* was much more favorable; rather than denying its national value, Hebraists sought to improve it.[27] Apparently, this was also true for the parents, young teachers, and children who sought to modernize Jewish education in many ways. Hebrew, the holy tongue, became one of the markers of modern upbringing, but certainly not the only one.

The favorable view of many adults to children's interest in Hebrew can be seen in the youths' extracurricular Hebrew activities. Most important among

[26] Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy*, 178–89.

[27] Steven J. Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle, 1999), 41–62.

them was the *neshef*, or Hebrew party. The occasion was usually Hannukah or Purim—holidays granted new meaning by Zionist ideology, which recast them into modern national festivals.[28] Every year the papers were flooded with descriptions of such events, which included the performance of plays, poem recitals, and group singing. In addition to Zionist classics, the use of new texts published in these Hebrew magazines became a very popular element in these celebrations.[29] The *neshef* was inspired by adult cultural evenings common in Eastern Europe, but it had an additional value in the Hebraist context: it served as an opportunity to present the achievements of Hebrew education to the public and to experiment with new applications of the language.

In 1902, a group of teenage boys and girls from Riga reported proudly about their Hannukah production, presenting a play published in *Olam Katan* and written by I. H. Tawiow, who happened to be the father of one of the boys. The school also staged a play penned by one of the fourteen-year-olds, who hoped the newspaper would publish it later. In the same issue, a younger boy wrote about a lively party in Homel and confessed that he had forgotten Herzl's name at a crucial moment.[30] This admission was an example of a not uncommon appearance of basic authenticity in these children's letters—even if those might have been rewritten to some extent by adults.

There were other festive dates. In Crimea, students performed a play at a Tu Bishvat celebration, and ten-year-old Lea Chilak described how she played the lead role.[31] On Lag Ba-Omer, in a variation of a tradition continued from the *ḥeder* experience, classes marched to a nearby forest, sang Bialik's *El ha-Zipor* and Hatikvah, and engaged in special Lag Ba-Omer games in commemoration of the Jewish revolt against the Romans. "The memory of this holiday will never leave our hearts," declared students of a *ḥeder metukan* from the Kherson area. In the next issue of *Ha-Perahim*, other children were quite disappointed since some "*pelishtim*" (Philistines, here meaning gentile boys) harassed them in the countryside and forced them to return home.[32]

Another type of Hebrew activity, evidently inspired by adults, was the establishment of Hebrew or Zionist associations, with names such as "The

[28] François Guesnet, "Chanukah and Its Function in the Invention of a Jewish-Heroic Tradition in Early Zionism, 1880–1900," in *Nationalism, Zionism and Ethnic Mobilization of the Jews in 1900 and Beyond*, ed. Michael Berkowitz (Leiden, 2004), 227–45; Hizky Shoham, *Carnival in Tel Aviv: Purim and the Celebration of Urban Zionism* (Boston, 2014); Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington, 2009), 141–64.

[29] *He-Chaver* 2, no. 16 (1910).

[30] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 30 (1902).

[31] *Ha-Perahim* 2, no. 19 (1909). For some reason the play was "Hannah and Her Seven Sons," which is associated with Hannukah.

[32] *Ha-Perahim* 6, nos. 17, 18–19 (1913).

Children of Zion" or "Hebrew Speakers," through which the children shared books and spoke with one another in Hebrew. Most of these initiatives were most likely abandoned relatively quickly, but some survived for a longer period of time. In a 1904 issue of *Olam Katan*, three letters described such associations. The first, in Zhytomyr, had been active for six months and had seventy members, aged ten and up; it operated a library for four hours every day and subscribed to two children's magazines. In neighboring Malyn, seventeen boys had come together in the two weeks preceding the date of the letter, in which they wrote that "we are reading and speaking only Hebrew, and any boy who speaks *jargon* [Yiddish] pays a fine." They subscribed to *Olam Katan*, and the local Zionist library lent them books. The third letter came from a boy asking to correspond in Hebrew with fellow readers since there was no Hebrew speakers' association in his town.[33] No doubt, the editors intentionally printed these three letters in the same issue, to motivate readers to participate in similar activities. Still, the children expressed enjoyment of the social aspect of these clubs as they took their first steps toward cultural and political self-organization.

Ha-Ach had a completely different educational attitude. The paper was designed to support the Chabad yeshiva and, naturally, traditional study of Jewish subjects was central to the *Ha-Ach* editorial line, while other types of learning were firmly rejected. Accordingly, readers' communications stressed their dedication to the Torah both in learning and in practice, often praising the magazine's positive influence on them. Twelve-year-old Menachem Nachum, from the Kyiv area, wrote:

> In my name, and in the name of everyone who studies with me in the yeshiva that was founded here, in the town of Zvenigorodoka, I would thank the esteemed editor very much because thank God since we are reading his paper *Ha-Ach*, which has awakened our desire for learning the holy Torah.[34]

Others reported on the topic of their bar mitzvah speeches, and one child shared the resolutions he had made on that occasion, including a determination to obey his parents and to pray devoutly.[35] In the eyes of the young readers, *Ha-Ach* was perceived as a respected authority figure who approved of their behavior and appreciated their accomplishments.

Ha-Ach's audience was not exclusively Orthodox. One reason was that it presented the novelty of a children's Hebrew magazine without emphasis on the ideological orientation expected from such a format, as is evident from a

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[33] *Olam Katan* 3, no. 37 (1904).
[34] *Ha-Ach* 2, no. 20 (1912).
[35] *Ha-Ach* 2, no. 13 (1912).

letter published in one of the first issues. After an introduction familiar from other publications, noting his age and the length of his Hebrew study, the nine-year-old writer asked about the identity of rabbis mentioned in stories. His distance from the Orthodox worldview is even more apparent in his request for more Hebrew at the expense of the Yiddish texts "since we have no interest in the *jargon*."[36] Rosenblum responded in an editorial note that many women and girls, as well as men and boys, read the paper but did not know Hebrew; and in any event, "the language is not the main thing, but rather the content."[37] In addition, the Lyubavichi rabbi himself, or his teachings, were not emphasized, suggesting the attempt to reach a wider audience, beyond the rebbe's disciples.

Another factor contributing to the varied reading public of the paper was the fluidity between different educational paths that many families followed. The ideological literature might suggest sharply defined borders between Orthodoxy, Zionism, and Russification. In practice, alternative educational institutions within the same family, or even in the same child's life, were not uncommon.[38] Thus, parents and children debating the available options could subscribe to a paper that did not fully reflect their choices in other domains. The following letter offers perhaps the most illuminating example of this:

> I am full of praise for this paper because I have seen children who were foreign to their people and religion, and now they pray every day. . . . I am reading and re-reading [*Ha-Ach*], and my heart is happy, and I see that our nation has not failed yet; it will rise from its inferiority and come close to its religion. I am already studying Hebrew; I have learned the Hebrew language, Bible, and *poskim*(?). After Sukkot, I am going to Eretz Israel.[39]

The author of this letter—who displayed a remarkable combination of religious sentiment, Hebraist knowledge, and practical Zionism—was the future modernist poet Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973). His family was related to the Schneersohns, and he was a friend of young Menachem Mendel; the parents disagreed about his education and, after a period in a modern yeshiva, ended up enrolling him at the Hebrew gymnasium in Jaffa.[40] Much like the

[36] *Ha-Ach* 1, no. 8 (1911).
[37] Ibid.
[38] Bassok, *Revival of the Jewish Youth*, 268–78, following Max Weinreich and others, found a similar phenomenon in the interwar era.
[39] *Ha-Ach* 2, no. 42 (1912). The question mark is in the original, and its meaning here is not clear.
[40] Hagit Halperin, *Maestro: The Life and Works of Avraham Shlonsky* [in Hebrew] (Bnei Brak, 2011), 49–54.

ḥeder boys who discovered *Olam Katan* and *Ha-Perahim*, or the gymnasium student who joined a Hebraist club, many children enjoyed *Ha-Ach* even though they themselves did not follow an observant lifestyle.

Girls Enter the Hebrew Public Space

> I am nine years old! For about two years, I have studied Hebrew according to the natural method from the teacher of the *ḥeder metukan*. . . . This year, I went into the gymnasium in our town, where most of the students are Jewish daughters [*mi-bnot ha-ivrim*]. And much to my surprise, among all the students, I did not find one [girl] that knew or spoke the Hebrew language. And because of that, I almost came to the wrong conclusion that our language is only for boys and not for girls. . . . I found inside [*Ha-Perahim*] many letters by girls written in good style, testifying that girls, too, know our language, and that only the girls of our town are the exceptions. And then, I began to agitate for our language among my friends the gymnasium students.
> –Rachel Litwak, Rechytsa, Minsk region.[41]

Gender difference in command of Hebrew is a well-grounded historical fact. Girls were traditionally excluded from the *ḥeder* and its primary Hebrew instruction, learning to read and pray in Yiddish instead. When integration trends in Eastern Europe grew stronger, progressive—and even Orthodox—parents sent their daughters to non-Jewish institutions, where they learned Russian, German, Polish, and French.[42] This approach led to the apparent underrepresentation of women in the early stages of modern Hebrew literature, both as readers and as writers.[43] The situation changed in private *maskilic* schools, where Hebrew instructions gradually developed to comprehensive study of the language.[44] With the reform of methods for teaching Hebrew, girls began to be welcomed to the *ḥeder metukan* alongside the boys.

The Hebrew children's magazines were, to my knowledge, the first platform that allowed this pioneering generation of girls to join Hebrew public

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[41] *Ha-Perahim* 3, no. 8 (1910).

[42] Shaul Stampfer, "What Did 'Knowing Hebrew' Mean in Eastern Europe?" in *Hebrew in Ashkenaz*, ed. Lewis Gilnert (Oxford, 1993), 129–40; Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*; Rachel Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Women Runaways in Habsburg Galicia* (Princeton, 2020), 11–54.

[43] Tova Cohen and Shmuel Feiner, eds., *Voice of a Hebrew Maiden: Women's Writings of the Nineteenth-Century Haskalah Movement* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2006), 9–17.

[44] Adler, *In Her Hands*, 91–92.

discourse and to express themselves and reflect on the meaning of their gender. Interestingly, their inclusion in the audience was not questioned; letters from girls were featured regularly in all three non-Orthodox papers—albeit, to a lesser degree than from boys. Readers of both genders mentioned this disparity and called for more substantial participation from girl readers.[45] They were aware of the unique situation of Hebrew: young Hana Greenberg from Berdychiv, for example, noted that the distribution of letter-writers was the opposite in the Russian children's magazine she read, a magazine that published more readers' letters from girls than those written by boys.[46] However, neither editors nor readers addressed the reasons that girls tended to be less educated in the Hebrew language, which was hardly a secret. Naively but tellingly, Lea Frida Bloch wrote: "I was told that in order to speak Hebrew, one needs to know many words from the Talmud [*milim talmudiyot*], and how much do I envy boys who study Gemara and are able to speak whatever they wish to speak."[47] She was not mistaken; by the turn of the century, the *maskilic* biblical purism had been abandoned in favor of rabbinic Hebrew vocabulary. That process directly impacted girls negatively since the Talmud was at the heart of the taboo against teaching girls Torah.[48] Hence, any boy exposed to a little Talmud or Mishnah had a clear advantage in acquiring modern Hebrew. Young Lea did not question this gender discrimination; instead, she hoped to start learning *Ein Yaakov*, the medieval completion of aggadic legends that served as a popular alternative to Talmud study for unlearned men.

Across the three nationalist magazines, antagonism to Hebrew instruction of girls, whether due to the traditional prohibition or to simple conservatism, was never brought up. It would seem that the editors of these publications avoided arguments against Hebrew education—whether in relation to girls or in general. Levner, the editor and publisher of *Ha-Perahim*, was a rabbi, but he never published editorial texts nor commented on the gender issue more than regarding other issues; his positive (or passive) attitude toward girls' participation was apparent by his frequent printing of their letters. The only instance in which any of the papers bothered to dispute arguments made against the use of Hebrew was in connection with the rivalry of *He-Chaver's* Tawiow with Yiddish newspapers.[49] Moreover, the criticism that girls and women were not adequately represented among the papers' contributors and letter-writers demonstrated that, at least in the nationalist leaning

[45] See, for example, *He-Chaver* 1 (1908), no. 74; *Ha-Perahim* 7, no. 5 (1914).
[46] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 27 (1902).
[47] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 47 (1902).
[48] Hannah Kehat, *Since Torah Became Talmud Torah: Changes in the Concept of Torah Study in the Modern Age* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2016), 649–68.
[49] *He-Chaver* 1, nos. 43–51 (1908).

circles within Jewish society, the idea of girls studying Hebrew was not revolutionary and even quite common. The unquestionably Zionist publication *Olam Katan* declaratively encouraged such learning by girls.[50]

This approach was also practiced in editorial decisions. *Olam Katan*, *Ha-Perahim*, and *He-Chaver* all published stories that included girls as significant characters or even as protagonists; occasionally, they printed texts by female authors such as Chemda Ben-Yehuda. Nevertheless, these instances were comparatively few by comparison to the Russian children's literature of the era, in which women authors and female heroines were highly popular.[51] The girls in the Hebrew audience anticipated seeing women participating in the magazines, as is apparent from a letter to *He-Chaver*: one girl stated that she was saddened to realize that in the most recent issue of the paper, "I could not find there even one story signed by a woman!" She directed her complaint to the female writers rather than to the male editors, asking them to provide her with stories.[52] Her wish was fulfilled two months later with a story by the pioneering author Dvora Baron, dedicated "to my little sisters," which featured a girl saying kaddish after her grandfather's passing, to the discontent of those around her."[53] Overall, the phenomenon of girls knowing Hebrew was perhaps not viewed as a subversive matter, but their position was still secondary to that of their male peers.

Not surprisingly, the picture was very different in *Ha-Ach*. On the one hand, it published various texts in Yiddish aimed at its female readers. On the other hand, a repeated theme of the serialized Hebrew stories was of a boy sent to the gymnasium by a mother who has been tempted by the nice uniforms and promises of a great future, but with the boy ending up as a heretic criminal, revolutionist, or both. Sisters and potential brides often were characterized as frivolous young ladies who spent their time reading penny novels and disparaging yeshiva boys. Women, then, were described in this paper as shallow creatures, inciting innocent boys to follow the ways of despicable Haskalah; girls were never themselves encouraged to learn seriously.[54] Given this attitude, and since Orthodox girls were less likely to receive Hebrew education, one may assume that girls were not part of *Ha-Ach*'s audience. However, it is reasonable that in a family context, some girls did read the paper or

[50] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 3 (1902).

[51] Hellman, *Fairy Tales*, 178–84.

[52] *He-Chaver* 1, no. 29 (1908). An almost identical complaint was addressed to *Olam Katan*; see *Olam Katan* 1, no. 62 (1902).

[53] "Kadisha," *He-Chaver* 1, no. 72–73 (1908). Another story by Baron ("Geniza") and one by the unrecognized author Hadassah Borde followed; both had female heroines. Ibid, nos. 95–98. On this era of Baron's writing, see Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley, 1997), 92–101.

[54] See the serialized story from the first year of publication: *Ha-Ach* 1, nos. 6–30 (1911).

listened to their siblings read aloud; at the very least, they were able to read the frequent Yiddish texts. One letter, signed by "Shalom, Zevi, Sara, [and] Shaul Meisel," implies that the girls indeed saw themselves as part of the audience.[55] Interestingly, despite its antagonism to Haskalah, *Ha-Ach* never actively argued against Hebrew instruction for girls, indicating that it was not yet as common a trend as the texts in the other periodicals might suggest.

Since Hebrew education was still heavily gender-segregated, girls expressed loneliness regarding their linguistic preference, especially those who—like the girl quoted at the beginning of this section—studied in a gymnasium, where the chance of befriending someone with a similar interest in Hebrew was low. The magazines provided them with virtual companionship and assurance, against the background of a skeptical atmosphere.[56] The sisterhood did not have to stay virtual: over the years, several girls suggested to their fellow female readers that they correspond among themselves, "because through that, the love between us will grow, and the rest of our sisters, who do not yet study our language, will do as we do when they hear that there are Hebrew girls who learn Hebrew."[57] Some pleaded with their parents to provide them with Hebrew lessons after encountering girls who spoke Hebrew "just like the boys."[58] This perception of the children's publication was similar to those of male readers who lived in areas where Hebrew culture remained negligible.[59]

However, not all girls who learned Hebrew were alone, especially those living in prominent Hebraist communities. The "Yehudiya" [lit. "Jewess"] girls' school in Vilnius was famous enough for Bialik to visit the students;[60] in Odessa, an eight-year-old met Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (she found his Sephardi pronunciation challenging to understand).[61] As we saw earlier, girls attended the schools that conducted Hannukah or Purim *neshafim*, sometimes alongside the boys. They, too, established Hebrew associations and sent collective donations for various purposes.[62] The donations lists, the importance of which will be discussed below, included a significant number of girls' names.

[55] *Ha-Ach* 3, no. 26 (1913). See also *Ha-Ach* 1, no. 15 (1911), writing to "my brothers and sisters, readers of *Ha-Ach*."

[56] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 32–33 (1903).

[57] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 46 (1902).

[58] *Ha-Perahim* 6, no. 4 (1913).

[59] See, for example: *Olam Katan* 2, no. 41 (1904); *Ha-Perahim* 6, no. 18–19 (1913).

[60] *He-Chaver* 2, no. 6 (1908). "Yehudiya" was an afternoon school focusing on Hebrew and Jewish subjects, directed at girls who attended Russian schools. See *Froyenshcul Yehudiya in Vilno* (Vilnus, 1913).

[61] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 29 (1902).

[62] See several examples at *Olam Katan* 3, no. 1 (1903).

Even in *Ha-Ach*, girls were occasionally listed among the donors who made contributions to the yeshiva.

Another section of the magazines where girls appeared was the regular list of readers who successfully solved riddles that appeared in previous issues. Riddles were so popular, and young readers were so eager to see their names in print, that the editors had to constantly apologize for not including all of them. Solving the puzzles, even those that did not rely on linguistic or literary (usually biblical) proficiency, required some command of the Hebrew language. Yet, girls were often among those named as having solved the riddles, including (albeit infrequently) in *Ha-Ach*. Those who sent in solutions to the riddles were, by definition, involved readers, and their inclusion among that group shows that the girls might have been a smaller portion of the Hebrew audience, but were nonetheless an active part of it.

In the early twentieth century, Hebrew and Yiddish press helped to create the Jewish imagined community, in Benedict Anderson's sense, offering a network of readers bounded by their relation to the newspaper and its content.[63] That was also true for the Hebrew children's magazines, and particularly for its female readers. For these girls, the magazine was more than a recreational activity or a method to advance the level of their Hebrew literacy. It offered a model for behavior, an imagined community of girls—as well as boys—sharing similar experiences and adult approval that could counter an unsupportive environment. They could even picture a future in which they could become valuable contributors to the emerging body of Hebrew literature. No wonder their letters often expressed genuine loyalty and appreciation for the magazines' existence.

Fundraising and the Magazines' Imagined Community

> Zvenigorodka, Kyiv region.
> Today, the thirteenth of Shevat, having turned twelve, I am sending my donation ... [of] fifty-four kopecks. I will ask to be counted among the brothers, and let them bless me that I become one of *ha-temimim*.
> –Israel, son of Menachem Nachum Rechter.[64]

One of the unique characteristics of the newspaper as a format is its ability to nurture a community of readers and direct them to take action. And even if children could not vote, they could still partake in another favorite public activity of the Jewish society: fundraising. Wide-scale Jewish charity projects

[63] Ury, *Barricades and Banners*, 164–69.
[64] *Ha-Ach* 2, no. 20 (1912).

gained renewed importance in the era of nationalism, through fundraising efforts that were directed at the Jewish public seeking support of the nationalist/Zionist cause.[65] In this sense, as recent research has shown, local fundraising was as meaningful for growth of the Zionist movement as international philanthropy.[66] From the 1880s onwards, the Hebrew press turned small-scale fundraising into a new genre: lists of donors to various Zionist causes were published regularly, often mentioning a celebration during which the money was collected or presented as a symbolic gift. In the days close to holidays such as Passover and Rosh Hashanah, personal ads—including seasonal greetings—which announced a (usually modest) contribution to some public purpose, filled the pages of the papers, particularly *Ha-Melitz*. The trend was common enough that Ahad Ha'am saw the need to criticize it for commercializing the public's goodwill.[67]

The children's magazines followed this model and often urged their readers to donate money, promising to print their names in a designated section. Popular causes for publishers and readers of the adult press were workers in the Palestinian colonies, the Jaffa Hebrew school, the Treasury of Hebrew Books (which eventually formed the basis of the National Library of Israel), and the Jewish National Fund (KKL). However, the children's magazines preferred to focus their efforts more narrowly. Each one championed a specific fundraising endeavor reflecting its principles and audience. The participation of the young readers in collecting the money, sending it, and sometimes commenting on the issue in their letters served to politicize the children's thinking, and helped to spread the relevant ideology further. In return, children enjoyed the opportunity to become a part of a larger community.

Ha-Ach, whose raison d'être was to solicit donations to the Chabad yeshiva in Lyubavichi, is the most interesting case of the four. In general, Chabad tried to reach audiences beyond its direct followers to support the institution, employing the periodical as medium of mass communication.[68] Its subscription charge was considered a donation, and the subscribers were named "brothers" of the yeshiva's students (*achei ha-temimim*). This policy was announced in the opening issue of *Ha-Ach*, in a triple text: in vowelized Hebrew for the children, in vowelized(!) Yiddish for the parents, and in regular Hebrew for the teachers. The first part was formulated as a direct appeal from the students to their so-called brothers, whose generosity was rewarded

[65] Michael Berkowitz, "Toward an Understanding of Fundraising, Philanthropy and Charity in Western Zionism, 1897–1933," *Voluntas* 7 (1996): 241–58.

[66] Jan Rybak, *Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation-Building in War and Revolution, 1914–1920* (Oxford, 2021).

[67] Ahad Ha'am, "Yalkut Katan," *Ha-Shiloaḥ* 1 (1897): 86–87.

[68] Lurie, *Lubavitch Wars*, 123.

with entertaining reading materials and with the honor of seeing their names in print. The appeal to the teachers described the periodical as a collaborative project: "The parents will generously contribute their pennies to their children, and the teachers will support their students, clarify to them anything difficult and raise them to love reading this paper." A rhymed poem about a boy asking his mother for money for the poor yeshiva students and a list of four dozen "brothers" from the town of Orsha (today in Belarus) completed the first issue.[69]

Not every issue was as blunt in its approach, but the campaign for the yeshiva was relentless. In the literary section, stories and articles about the Tomchei Temimim yeshiva appeared repeatedly; the yeshiva was always depicted as the ultimate response to the dangerous spirits of modern times. Periodically, *Ha-Ach* featured texts written by the students, thanking and blessing their dear "brothers." In the 1913 Purim issue, readers were presented with a "*mishloah manot*" gift: a poem praising pious life, condemning foreign education, and calling on the readers to join the shared goal:

> Let us unite in mind and become one,
> and we will study the Torah as much as our heart pleases . . .
> Let us please not follow the studies [of]
> Greek, French, that are not from the Jews . . .
> Do good, like us, and choose the Torah.[70]

The readers in the towns across the Pale of Settlement did not need to travel to Lyubavichi to join the *temimim*. To become part of the brotherhood, it was enough that they adopt their values or simply subscribe to *Ha-Ach*. The notion of the imagined community was crystal clear here, and the message undoubtedly found its audience.

The editorial section of *Ha-Ach* was devoted almost exclusively to the yeshiva. A typical issue consisted of four pages, and the lists of donors (alongside the names of the children who had solved the published riddles and readers' letters) could amount to a full page, coming at the end of the paper (fig. 3). The paper also provided reports on the yeshiva's financial expenses, study schedule, and admission protocols aimed at the adult audience. This proportion attested to the importance Rosenblum, the editor, attributed to the paper's relationship with its involved readership and to his success in fostering that relationship: boys, and occasionally girls, were enthusiastic about collecting money and receiving public recognition. Moshe Levin

[69] *Ha-Ach* 1, no. 1 (1911). Later that year, when the magazine struggled to publish regular issues, it was announced that the cost of the issues that would have been published in the missing weeks would be considered a voluntary donation. Ibid, no. 38.
[70] *Ha-Ach* 3, no. 24 (1913).

מעות נדבות אחים חנוכה.

אושאץ מרדכי הינדלין יחי׳ . . . . . 5 ק״כ „ אברהם אינגבר „ . . . . . . 15 ק״כ
לאדמיר מיכל פינקל „ . . . . . . 15 „ סמרגון צבי ברודנא „ . . . . . . 20 „
„ דוד פישעל „ . . . . . . 10 „ „ עוד על ידו „ . . . . . . 30 „

הילדים אחי-התמימים אשר מלאו להם שלש עשרה שנה.
להילד העסקן מר דובער עפשטיין מעיר סעננא פלך מוהילוב ט״ו טבת העבר נדב . 36 ק״כ
„ „ „ שמואל אלטשולער „ קאריוקאווקע פ. צרניגוב כ״ז טבת „ „ . 36 „
„ „ „ שניאור זלמן „ הלוכאוו פלך „ ט״ו שבט „
יחיו ויגדלו ויאריכו ימים ושנים בעשר וכבוד ויראת השם סלה!

Figure 3. Donors' Names in *Ha-Ach*, 1911.

of Pinsk, for example, proudly reported that he was recruiting subscribers among his classmates and called on his fellow readers to do so as well.[71] In other cases it was noted that the children donated the money they were gifted for Hanukkah or Purim.

This use of the paper's last page strengthened the mutual bond between the readers and the yeshiva. Readers wrote of their admiration for the students, and yeshiva students greeted the readers in return, particularly any bar mitzvah boys who had sent a symbolic offering. In their letters, the children seemed to fully internalize the message, adopting powerful terminology of brotherhood. For example, Eliyahu Feizner from Polatsk (today in Belarus) signed his letter: "your brother in mind, hoping to follow you in honest heart and be your brother forever." He was answered as follows: "From the bottom of our hearts, we bless you with happiness, wealth, long life, and piety [*yir'at ha-shem sela*]; *ha-temimim*."[72] Expressions like "your brother in mind," "your brother who misses you," and even "see you soon" were typical.[73]

The wish children expressed to study in the yeshiva might feel contrived; after all, the heavy rabbinic style of many of the letters indicates the guiding hand of an adult, and *Ha-Ach* had its known interest in publishing them. Nevertheless, the letters and the long lists of donors, amounting in some weeks to dozens, demonstrate that the campaign was impactful; the paper clearly had the ability to nourish, even if only temporarily, the idea of yeshiva life of devoted learning as a model of exemplary adolescence. The complicated educational situation for Jews in Czarist Russia—involving choices between traditional and modern schools, as well as societal and legal discrimination—played a role here too. The age of the readers and the importance that all four

[71] *Ha-Ach* 1, no. 15 (1911).
[72] *Ha-Ach* 1, no. 28 (1911).
[73] *Ha-Ach* 4, nos. 8 and 13 (1914); 2, no. 4 (1912).

children's magazines ascribed to education created a need for each one to emphasize specific desired models of higher learning. *He-Chaver*, for example, praised the Jaffa Hebrew Gymnasium as an alternate path to Russian education. However, it could not provide as consistent and persuasive a model as *Ha-Ach* in championing the Tomchei Temimim yeshiva. The allure of the Russian (or Hebrew) gymnasium was strong, but the notion of a community, almost a family, bound by the ideals of Torah study and religious devotion, was an effective counter.

Another promising future presented to the young children of Eastern Europe was the Land of Israel. *Olam Katan*, with its Zionist commitment that often bordered on propaganda, utilized both the news and the literary sections to recruit readers to the Zionist cause. Ben-Avigdor and Gordon, the editors, stressed the national importance of the ancient Jewish homeland and the historical language. In the heyday of Herzl as the movement's charismatic leader, the magazine reported at length on the Zionist Congresses, with accompanying photographs and expressions of overt optimism. Even after the notorious Uganda Congress of 1903, it avoided any mention of the bitter internal controversy about finding alternative locations for a Jewish autonomous region.[74] Instead, an essay from Basel concluded with an explicit message:

> And you, son, if you desire the redemption of our people and land, learn our language, which will be the language of our people coming back to life in our country, and become fluent in it, in order for all the little Zionists to see and do.[75]

Thanks to this article, noted one reader, he finally understood what the adults were discussing and promised to become a farmer in Palestine when he grew up.[76]

Aside from the regular informative pieces about Zionist activities, many texts in the literary section addressed life in the *Yishuv*, in both fictional and nonfictional form, with a focus on young heroes. In its first year, the magazine ran a serial story by Yehuda Gur-Grazovsky, an author living in Palestine, entitled "A Journey in the Land of Israel." In the travelogue, the participants toured the Zionist colonies (*moshavot*); along the way, they met the students at the Mikveh Israel agricultural school and the kindergarten toddlers in Rishon LeZion. At the latter location, the author, one of the pioneers of modern Hebrew teaching, presented the following concern through his (adult) hero: "But it is so hard to teach a young child to speak a language in which they do

[74] *Olam Katan* 3 (1903), no. 49.
[75] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 32 (1902).
[76] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 61 (1902).

not know even one word!" The local teacher agrees, but invites the guests to witness the students' achievements, which turn out to be impressive. A photograph of the kindergarten's children was attached.[77] In another story, the beloved children's author Yehuda Steinberg took a different approach. In his utopia, the youngsters of Jerusalem are oblivious to the notion of exile and wonder about the mourning customs of Tisha b'Av.[78] Both stories invited the readers to imagine themselves speaking Hebrew, living in the biblical landscape, and being connected to the glorious past.

These descriptions of Zionist childhood were not all fiction. There were some Hebrew-speaking children in Palestine, and *Olam Katan* was a natural platform for them to communicate with their European peers. One particular group of letter-writers was destined to become a Zionist myth later on in their lives—but, at the time, they were just a ordinary Zionist family: Alexander, Sara, and Rivka Ahronsohn sent a letter describing the Purim festivities in Zikhron Yaakov and a donation they had made to the Jewish National Fund.[79] In other cases, however, the young writers came from families of the Hebraist elite of the *Yishuv*, such as the daughters of David Yellin and David Yodelvich.[80] In a third case, children of two previous Hebrew teachers in Jaffa—one of them was Sh. L. Gordon himself—used the magazine to correspond with each other and to reminisce about their experiences there.[81]

The letters that were sent to *Olam Katan* from children in Palestine illustrated children's daily life there while acknowledging the varieties of Jewish communities in the country. Responses from Europe expressed admiration for the idyllic Zionist childhood while internalizing the Hebraist terminology: "How much I envy you, brothers, [because] you are living in our ancestors' land, the land where our kings, prophets, and priests lived, and ... you are speaking the language of our ancestors since they became a people."[82]

Olam Katan encouraged donations to the Jewish National Fund, to the Hebrew school in Jaffa, and to other similar causes, but the most successful campaign came on the heels of the Kishinev pogrom in April 1903. Remarkably, the editors did not try to spare the details of this pogrom from young

[77] *Olam Katan* 1, no. 51 (1902).

[78] *Olam Katan* 3, no. 49–52 (1903).

[79] *Olam Katan* 3, no. 28 (1904). The Ahronshons are known now thanks to the underground network they established during WWI, designed to help the British army conquer Ottoman Palestine.

[80] *Olam Katan* 1, nos. 40, 56 (1902). The writers grew up to be notable figures: Zila Feinberg, a Zionist and feminist activist, and Yosef Yoel Rivlin, known for his Hebrew translation of the Quran.

[81] *Olam Katan* 1, no. 39 (1902).

[82] *Olam Katan* 1, no. 57 (1902).

readers and provided graphic descriptions of the violence, drawn from contemporary adult newspapers.[83] A short poem accompanied the report, calling on the children to collect money for those orphaned by the riots. Relief campaigns for the victims were conducted worldwide,[84] and *Olam Katan* naturally chose to focus on the young orphans as the specific subject of their fundraising. It was not very different from the effort of a Russian children's journal during the Russo-Japanese War, a year later, to collect money for children of wounded soldiers.[85] The initiative of Menachem Ussishkin to send the orphans to the Mikveh Israel agricultural school in Palestine enabled the magazine to phrase the fundraising as part of its declared mission to raise loyal Zionists. The first wave of contributions from readers was introduced as follows:

> We, the children signed below, hereby send our donations for the orphans of the martyrs (*kedoshim*) killed in the riots in Kishinev, to educate them to be good Hebrews in our ancestors' land, and we will thus merit the opportunity to be educated by our good parents, and together with them will emigrate (*na'aleh*) to our beautiful ancestors' land.[86]

The news deeply moved the children; many reported that they cried and were keen to help. They offered modest contributions, starting with ten kopecks, and called on their peers to do the same: "Who will feel [what is in] the hearts of the suffering little orphans if not us, the young children?" explained one girl. Another boy reflected on a sleepless night following the horrific news and concluded: "Now, we feel more strongly that the Zionist idea is a necessary one. Hence, my dear friends, let us learn our Hebrew language so we can be of help to our Zionist brothers."[87] As the pogrom shook the Jewish world, the magazine mediated between children across Europe. Students of a Jewish school in Manchester, England, wished that "we could be like Judah the Maccabee or Bar Kochva so that we could have helped our poor people," but since they could not physically protect the victims, they could offer only the money that they had collected to help them.[88] During the following months, dozens of donations were sent in. That summer, for instance, a group

[83] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 32–33 (1903). The sensational style was no stranger to this publication, which often published news about fires, floods, and other disasters that had occurred throughout the world; the style may have been used in the hope of attracting more readers.

[84] Steven J. Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (New York, 2018), 101–04.

[85] Hellman, *Fairy Tales*, 264.

[86] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 32–33 (1903).

[87] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 35 (1903).

[88] *Olam Katan* 2, no. 44 (1903).

of teenagers in a dacha near Homel held a *neshef* and collected an impressive sum of ten rubles that was dedicated to the cause.[89]

The following year, the magazine informed its readers about the orphans' journey from Kishinev to Palestine and about their training in the agricultural school. These orphans were presented to readers as having fulfilled the Zionist vision, which began with experiencing the horrors of antisemitism in exile and ended with a fruitful life in the promised land.

Ha-Ach and *Olam Katan* had vastly different, or even competing, worldviews. However, both employed similar tactics: they used literary, editorial, and informative texts to foster a clear ideal for their readers, and they carefully chose causes to which the children could contribute. The two publications took advantage of the young readers' enthusiasm, publishing letters and names of those who shared the editors' ideologies. In turn, seeing their fellow readers' letters and donations motivated other readers to join the public activity. This kind of audience mobilization was embedded so profoundly in the Jewish press that even *Ha-Perahim*, which generally refrained from explicit political indoctrination, collected money, and published donors' lists. In this instance, the cause for which the donations were collected was the payment for subscriptions for poor readers who could not otherwise afford them; for *Ha-Perahim*'s publishers, the ability to be a regular reader of a Hebrew newspaper was a no less worthy a cause than those supported by the other publications.[90]

Conclusion

Reading the letters of young readers might, at first glance, seem to provide only anecdotal information. However, these short texts emerge as invaluable sources when they are contextualized within the broader story of the modernization of Russian Jewry. The focus on mass media in Hebrew and its readership has exposed several nuanced ideological and sociological streams within Jewish society.

Hebrew is seen in these periodicals and readers' letters as a marker of Jewish national self-understanding even for Jews who paid little attention to political and practical Zionism. A significant group of these Jews based their sense of a national identity on shared language, culture, and history but did not view the goal of emigration to Palestine as a foregone conclusion. They promoted national awareness and culture as an aim in itself—when raising

[89] *Olam Katan* 3, no. 1 (1904).

[90] *Ha-Perahim* 4, no. 5–6 (1911); 5, no. 3 (1912).

funds, for example—and not only as a medium of political agitation. Orthodox Jews, too, had a more complicated attitude toward this aspect of modern Jewish culture than is sometimes claimed. They did not reject Hebrew in the same way that they opposed Zionism and Haskalah, but instead employed it to serve their own purposes, adopting many of the strategies used by their declared ideological adversaries.

The nuanced ideologies did not develop only in a top-down fashion; in other words, they were not only dictated by magazines' editors to their readers. They were also positions that were supported by those readers in their own particular circumstances. Children could learn in a Russian gymnasium while participating in a Hebrew club or make donations to a yeshiva without planning to study there. Private teachers made a living teaching the Russian curriculum and encouraged Hebrew reading; others turned to a traditional *ḥeder* to reform Jewish education without ignoring classical texts. Parents supported most of these endeavors and were never portrayed as active opponents, even when they had reservations about an emphasis on Hebrew language.

Of course, Hebrew was always a part of the lives of most Jews in its traditional form and roles. But as this article demonstrates, in the early twentieth century modern Hebrew—on its linguistic characteristics and cultural institutions—was also a vital component in the lives of many Jews. This development was not limited to individuals and communities with a narrow political orientation, namely Zionism. Given the similar pattern of education and communication found in these children's publications, we can reconsider modern Hebrew as a shared ground of many Jewish groups: boys and girls, gymnasium and *ḥeder metukan* students, Zionists and Orthodox Jews, Jews living in central Jewish cities and those living in peripheral villages. For many of them, Hebrew would not remain significant in the coming years, but at this point, it was more than a curiosity. It was a significant component of the larger cultural, sociological, and political changes they went through. When discussing the many paths along which Jewish modernization travelled, the Hebrew language, including its big and small players, should take a more central place.

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